

Climate change won't spare Toronto

The Toronto Star

August 13, 2022 Saturday

Copyright 2022 Toronto Star Newspapers Ltd. All Rights Reserved

Section: NEWS; Pg. A10

Length: 822 words

Byline: Shawn Micallef Opinion Twitter: @shawnmicallef

Body

The rain in London and the rest of the U.K. is often overstated, never as relentless as the clichés suggest. Still, the city is normally green and lush. Vast, well-maintained parks, healthy street trees and patches of green space throughout. Not this summer though.

Visiting London last week in the midst of a long drought and successive heat waves was both eye-opening and scary. Every park, lawn and field yellow like straw or sand. Walking through Hyde Park, in the big open area where the Rolling Stones recently played, the vastness of the yellow and brown was stunning. A desert in the city.

London feels like a harbinger of what is to come, experiencing the early shocks of climate change. Toronto shares a lot of similarities with London, beyond being its colonial offspring with so much of our city named after places and streets in London or after one of its former denizens, whether they ever visited or cared about Toronto or not.

Multicultural hubs, both cities attract people from around the world with their high quality of life and general security.

We're both lucky and unlucky in Toronto that we're somewhat insulated from the extreme effects of climate change so far. Lucky in while we are experiencing fluctuations in climate, they are mild to what London and other places have experienced. The rains have eventually come. The lake gives us clean water. The undeveloped ravines handle much of our stormwater and cool us down. The Greenbelt is, for now anyway, still green.

We're unlucky because this can lull us into a false state of complacency. As if what's happening around the world isn't that serious or that it won't affect us. Even in London, life continued on, vibrant and wonderful as ever, after the week when heat caused parts of the city to burst into flame. Mayor Sadiq Khan did ask that the sale of portable picnic barbecues be stopped so as to not light up those tinderbox parks.

Even when it does get swelteringly hot and humid in southern Ontario, enough middle- and upper-class folks have air conditioning that they're literally insulated from it, and our malls and public buildings are well-cooled. SUVs are cocoons of climate control.

It's easy to ignore.

Weeks ago, as temperatures soared towards 40 C in London, a city ill-equipped for such high temperatures, its buildings and houses with weak or no air conditioning, it was unbearable: everyone felt it. Just as those in Toronto do who can't afford air conditioning, or whose landlords don't provide or allow it. Housing advocates also say the city's cooling centres and heat emergency protocols are inadequate. The ones turned away from Toronto's full shelters know it, too.

Climate change won't spare Toronto

All of this is why the city of Toronto's TransformTO Net Zero Climate Action Strategy is incredibly important, even if it seems like a sleepy, technocratic initiative with long-term goals. It's likely one of the most important initiatives in Toronto's history, up there with building sanitary sewers and hospitals.

It's a detailed program of interrelated plans that aims to reduce greenhouse gases to zero by 2040, targeting key sectors like buildings, transportation and waste. That's just 18 years to change how the city fundamentally functions.

We need to switch to low carbon energy quickly in big ways and small (like opting for an electric stove rather than a dirty gas one) and new buildings need to be efficient, following the Toronto Green Standard guidelines, while aging ones updated through projects like Tower Renewal.

The city's own practises must change too. The TTC will switch to green buses from the diesel-fume belching ones now and the parks department will have to use smaller, more efficient vehicles in place of the giant pickup trucks it currently drives over lawns today. The Ravine Strategy needs to be fully funded and the urban forest cultivated and expanded.

The "to do" list of TransformTO is ambitious and exciting, but it's so complex and technical it not only needs skilled staff to implement it, which we have, but crucially, also political champions.

Mayor John Tory has said he supports the new "strong mayor" powers that may be coming his way. TransformTO is something he should champion as much as housing. Both of these are legacies he could be remembered for - if he's bold.

Ironically, the city's TransformTO webpage still lists ActiveTO as one of its related programs, one the mayor himself allowed to die.

The Vision Zero Road Safety Plan is also mentioned, and there's a goal of 75 per cent of school and work trips under five kilometres be achieved by walking, biking or transit, but we've seen how little Toronto police do to tame drivers, how slow safe pedestrian and cycling infrastructure is built. That, and the recent police focus on cyclists in High Park has sent a clear message of priorities.

If we're to TransformTO in order to save it and us, we'll need a strong mayor who actually wants to be strong.

Twitter: @shawnmicallef

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Journal Code: TTA

Subject: CLIMATE CHANGE (90%); EXTREME TEMPERATURES (89%); DROUGHT (78%); HEAT WAVES (78%); URBAN FORESTS (78%); WEATHER (78%); LAND USE PLANNING (77%); WATER RESOURCES (72%); FIRES (50%)

Industry: HVAC SYSTEMS (78%); URBAN FORESTS (78%); LAND USE PLANNING (77%)

Climate change won't spare Toronto

Person: SADIQ KHAN (79%)

Geographic: LONDON, ENGLAND (93%); TORONTO, ON, CANADA (93%); ONTARIO, CANADA (95%); CANADA (91%); UNITED KINGDOM (73%)

Load-Date: August 13, 2022

End of Document